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ABSTRACT

There are two distinct models of film production. One model, characterized as assembly line production, is the most prevalent in commercial settings and in universities. The project is initiated through management and progresses in an ordered flow of assembly through the hands of the specialized film workers; power is from the top down. The alternative model deals with film production as a natural process rather than as a mechanical assembly. As with film in the documentary tradition, it is concerned with the unstaged, unscripted, natural processes and rhythms of life rather than with power and control. As the model is currently used at the College of Human Medicine, Michigan State University, three entities (client/subject/film maker) interact equally toward production goals. A fourth entity, the audience, is ultimately included for an evaluation phase. This partnership model calls for responsible participation by all entities and allows for their mutual satisfaction. If the function of the university is to explore reality and nature and look for truth, the partnership model is more appropriate. (DAG)

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BUTTONPUSHER OR PARTNER ?

Two Contrasting Models of Film Production in a University Setting

by

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Over the many years which I have spent in film production I have become well acquainted with two quite distinct models of production. They can justly be viewed as polar opposites, differing in underlying ideology. These two ideologies affect all phases of production and are reflected in the kind of end product that is achieved and in the effect of this end product on its audience.

The most prevalent method of film production in commercial settings and in universities today is modeled on the turn of the century factory process of assembly line production. The production process is segmented, the workers deal only with a small part of it at a time. There is an ordered flow of the assembly starting with management's order, continuing through the hands of the writer, director, production manager, director of photography, cameraman, soundman, editor, laboratory technician, projectionist. (Except for the script "girl," most by the way, would be found to be white males.) The project gets initiated through management, which defines its own goals and priorities. From here on it becomes as alienated a process for the film worker as could be found in one of Detroit's car assembly lines and the characteristic job description is: Do what you are told to do.

As recently as a few years ago, ten years after the trial of Adolf Eichman, a new manager of a film unit told me that he was given orders from higher up, that he defines his job as following these orders and that I should therefore follow his. This was by no means an isolated incident and it characterizes this kind of film production process as a top-down execution of orders. The word "execution" brings to mind the military—and properly so. Essentially we are dealing here with an industrial assembly line process with a hefty infusion of the military type of pecking order and chain of command. The forms of human interaction we encounter in this model are still very much with us in our culture in general and I think are so familiar to us all that I need not explain further. Just remember the signs of hierarchy which abound in dress codes, office location (boss upstairs, worker downstairs) access to information, access to phones, secretaries, vacation schedules, salaries, fringe benefits, tone of voice, discouragement of feedback etc. Because this mode of film production contains elements of both the alienating assembly line and the military chain of command, I will call this model the: Pecking Order/Assembly Line Model.

This model of film production has its place in the larger communication context of someone sending a message to a receiver, usually written in horizontal fashion (like an assembly line): Sender → Message → Receiver. To be more precise and to point out the underlying power relationships we need to make this a vertical progression.

Sender	Powerful	Management
↓	↓	↓
Message	Mediator and Medium	Production Hierarchy Subject Film
↓	↓	↓
Receiver	Powerless	Audience

Now it becomes clear as to where to look for the key ideas and feelings which shape this mode of production: It is in the ideology of the sender, the powerful management. The key concepts are power and control. The first step is usually to produce an explicit script of the film to be done, a script which can be written and rewritten until it suits the wishes of the management. Unscripted happenings in life, such as you might find in a good documentary, are anathema to those who need to and want to control. With an approved script in hand, people, the actors, are then hired to illustrate it. Due to the small production budgets in university film production, hiring actors is often out of the question, therefore people, such as professors, staff and students, are persuaded, one way or another, to participate in the filming. In whatever way the footage may be generated, it is then spliced piece by piece alongside the all important script; if the shots don't fit or come from another context—so be it. The script is thought of as being primary and everything else becomes secondary—so much for the idea that film is a visual medium. To make sure the audience really gets the message, a male narrator with a deep voice is hired to read the scripts authoritatively—putting us all back into childhood with an Allpowerful, Allknowing, good but stern Father.

Usually these films are shown to a captive audience such as students whose only option might be to fall asleep. The visuals, chopped to fit the script, become a mere background and often they get in the way of the narration or actually contradict what is being pronounced. Thus, you might hear the narrator claim "the workers are happy" but you see faces that show hatred and boredom. The powerless audience is verbally instructed, talked to, talked down to, propagandized and brainwashed. By using bits of visual material to supposedly illustrate the approved script, the audience is not allowed to use their powers of observation, they are rendered impotent and have to fall back on the narrator's line of thought for any kind of continuity. I would think that this destruction of the audience's sense of empathy and visual acuity is especially harmful to younger children who are not sure what to trust, either their own sense of what they have observed or the word from on high. The audience

is seen in these productions as if they were children in need of guidance. For many in the audience this will probably be a self-fulfilling prophecy, for others it might provide a model for authoritarian conduct.

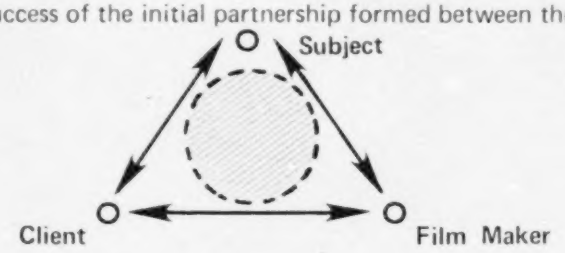
In the larger context of society, these productions will have the effect of either preserving or enhancing the status of the powerful by weakening the status of the receivers. I still wonder today how so many people could actually vote for Richard Nixon after seeing him on live television. Live television is much more truthful than manipulated film and yet he found support after repeatedly sweating out bald-faced lies in real time. Has the onslaught of manipulated media over the years destroyed the sense of visual acuity and a trust in one's observations for so many people?

Over the past few years i have been able to experiment with a different model of film production at the College of Human Medicine, Michigan State Universit y; it is based in its ideology on the opposite of the previous model. I deal with film in terms of a natural process rather than mechanical assembly. Rather than being concerned with ideas of power and control I am interested in the unstaged, unscripted, natural processes and rhythms of life. These concerns have been kept alive in the history of the film medium in the documentary tradition, which can perhaps be best described as an attempt to document with minimal interference. This approach is the key to the functioning of a model of film production which I will call the Partnership Model. While in it's schematic representation it will show only single entities such as one client, or one film maker, in practice, as we have discovered in the Interactional Analysis Lab here at MSU, it works quite well with small groups.

A project usually begins with a meeting between a professor and the film maker. If it looks like there might be good chances for a project to proceed, I, as the film maker, will then try to learn as much as possible about my client's area of interest and I will also begin to share my human and technical concerns. Thus we will form a partnership in which a considerable amount of work is done in the content area as well as in building our relationship with each other.

Sooner or later we will begin our search for the subject of the film and if it should be another person, you might soon find us sitting around a table, forming a larger partnership now of three interested parties with a common goal. During this period there is much feedback going on among these three partners, no one is in control. No one can be in control if it is to be a sensitive project which attempts to keep as much of the delicate life processes as undisturbed as possible.

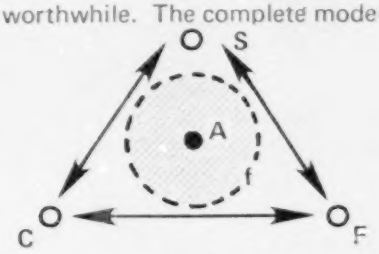
This cooperative triad then becomes the basic structure of the partnership model of film production and might be drawn with the subject holding the "higher" position, due to his or her importance to the success of the initial partnership formed between the client and film maker.



The area inside the triad could be described as the product of the common group endeavour, the film. This model shows clearly that something new is being created during the work that the three partners produce, it is not the film maker's, client's or subject's output, but a jointly created entity. This model also shows the importance given to the subject in this endeavour. In the pecking order/assembly line model of film production the subject is often discarded after it has been "shot," the actor is paid or the non-actor thanked for his or her bit. With the partnership model of production however, the subject is most likely involved with the project from the point of conceptualization to shooting, editing and screening. The subject of the film is also more likely to speak for himself or herself rather than be spoken about by a narrator. The footage used in the film is more likely to come from the area or time to be documented rather than from other contexts and it will therefore have a higher degree of integrity, or truth, if you will. Because of the underlying ideology of minimal interference, the footage will show more natural rhythms and flows rather than scripted, directed bits. Thus, an action by the subject is more likely to be shown in its entirety, having a beginning, middle and an end. The editing or cutting of the footage will occur because of those inherent rhythms which can be found in the footage, not because the narrator has moved on to a different topic. The "message" of the medium becomes with this approach a witnessing of life's happenings, only a small step removed from the real act occurring in real time because of the process of filming, selecting and condensing.

Because of this emphasis on the visual element and on minimal interference, a member of the audience is able to participate during the screening of the film as an active member of our partnership model. He or she might be said to reside in the center of the area which I have designated as the area of work of the partners, the film. During many of the deliberations during the planning of the film by the client, film maker and subject, the future member of an audience is indeed central to their concerns. All the effort is for naught unless the film becomes an effective way of allowing the audience member to re-experience the original event,

or reach a level of optimum empathy. Only if the audience member is invited and allowed to use his or her inherited and acquired powers of observation can the work of the original team be said to have been worthwhile. The complete model would then look like this:



C = Client
F = Film Maker
S = Subject
A = Audience
f = film

This partnership model of film production was used in the making of the film: "Floating in the Air, Followed By the Wind."* My client, Ron Simons, from the Department of Psychiatry came to me with the idea of documenting a Hindu healing ritual in Malaysia which he had had a chance to observe previously. We worked for some time on getting to know each other and our subject matter before we left for Malaysia. There we got to know many of the participants in the ritual before we ever shot a foot of film. We filmed with their warm cooperation. Upon its completion we gave a print of the film to the temple which had organized the festival and also reserved them the release rights for South East Asia. Much of the narration track is given over to the statements of the participants themselves; Ron and I hope to have even less of ourselves in the film on our next project. Because of the distance involved we were not able to involve our participants and partners in the editing process, nor did we get to enjoy the first screening with them and we are both bothered by this lack of completion of the process. Luckily I have had an opportunity since then to work with the subjects of a film right through to its completion and first public screening; it was an exhilarating experience for us all. During the final editing stages I was also able to bring in members of a future audience and was grateful for their fine suggestions.

The partnership model of film production calls for responsible participation by all involved. It is truly a process, a creative process rather than the obedient execution of orders from above. The film crew consists mostly of not more than two people, a camera person and a sound person; often the client can be the sound person, thus assuring minimal impact of people and technology on what we want to witness. Working in this fashion, one is responsibly involved from beginning to end, with everything and everyone. For the members of the partnership there can be an enormous opportunity for enrichment and at the end there is a sense of completion which is indeed hard to come by in this society as it is now organized. The members of the audience have a chance to become really involved for a while and perhaps use the impact of this experience to fashion their own future.

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*Available from Indiana University AV Center, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

For years our schools of communications have turned out many a competent film maker who is not able to find a meaningful and challenging job. Many university and commercial film production units are still locked into the pecking order/assembly line model. Their products put us to sleep or actually cause us harm. In addition to the higher quality and greater effectiveness of the final product, universities could benefit financially from the partnership model of film production. A hierarchical structure, involving a "Head" of film production at perhaps $25,000.00 per year and a what would it be? "Foot" of production at $7,500.00 would not be a productive as two competent film makers at $16,250.00 each.

There is still one problem with the partnership model which I would like to mention in closing. In the pecking order/assembly line model, initiation occurs through orders from the powerful management. At present, working with the partnership model in our university setting, initiation occurs from any one of our faculty members. To be more true to our model however, a model which works in a very egalitarian fashion, initiation should also be able to come from film maker, subject and audience.

One thing seems clear to me however: the pecking order/assembly line model cannot be defended any longer. It's underlying ideology is counter-productive to the goals of communication and education. It is about as dangerous to human health as the product of Detroit's assembly lines have shown themselves to be. The pecking order/assembly line model should be assigned to our large scrap heap of obsolete and dangerous ideas with which people have attempted to rule from the top with an iron hand. If the function of the university is to explore reality and nature and look for truth, then this partnership model (or a similar one) is the appropriate one to use. Why not try it?